

The Slave Ship

A Human History

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September 15, 2010

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By Marcus Rediker

The Slave Ship by Marcus Rediker is a scholarly story of the Middle Passage. This book traces the tale of the Slave from capture, through a torturous journey across Africa and the final chapter, transported across the Atlantic ending in the beginning of Hell to millions of Black Africans.

Rediker approaches this book in a four prong approach. He traces the slave trade through the relationship of the Ship's Captain and crew, the crew and the enslaved, the enslaved and each other as well as the capitalists and the abolitionists on two continents. Additionally he gives credit to the slave trade for the expansion of capitalism, industrial globalization as well as cooperation among rival nations.

To quote W.E.B. Dubois, this was "the most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history"—"the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell." This tale is told by the author, opening this book with a heart wrenching tale of a woman being death marched across Africa to be sold into bondage. "Expropriated from her native land, the woman was forced aboard a slave ship to be transported to a new work of work and exploitation, where she would likely produce sugar, tobacco, or rice and make her owner wealthy. This book follows her and others like her, onto the tall ships, those strange and powerful European machines that made it all possible." (Rediker, 4) It is noted in several reviews that Rediker develops the story of the enslaved women of the Middle Passage where very little written information exists.

Rediker tells this tale completely, including the story of the capture, the inhuman treatment of the captives by their captors, the history of “slavery” among African tribal chiefs, and the sale of the captives to the white man. Rediker includes a sociological study of the tribal relationships of the people on the interior of, and along the river routes of Africa. He details how the white men coerced and encouraged the black man to trap, defeat, and sell his fellow black man into the throes of white man’s slavery. Slave Ship also illustrates the transition of the Africans from helping in the capture of slaves to actually capitalizing on the sales of their own peoples. Originally the trade was exclusive to areas along the rivers and along the coast of Africa. As the trade becomes increasingly sophisticated, the “orders” for certain types of Africans become common. Different peoples of Africa are viewed as valuable for different types of commerce. The Africans from West Central Africa were viewed as the most valuable. They were fishermen, warriors, farmers and had many developed skills which would translate well on the plantation. During the 18th century the natives from this area were the most valuable “black gold” (87) of the trade.

He discusses, in minute detail, the building of the ships in Europe that would change the way business would be conducted along the “Triangle”. He explains how the ships would be “retrofit” on every journey to make room for a cargo of weapons and rum from Europe to Africa and then reconfigured to hold human cargo from Africa to the Americas. Additionally, the slave trade also required advances in the trade of ship building. The earliest wooden ships suffered when traveling into African waters. These ships later had to be fitted with “copper-sheathed hulls to protect them against boring tropical worms known as shipworms.”(71) While describing the specifics about the slaving ships in almost mind numbing detail, the measurements of every plank, barrel, sail, as well as the weights and measures of supplies and foodstuffs seems to go on ad-nauseam, and then back again as Rediker describes the ships pre and post retrofit. Then, just when this reader was ready to “throw in the towel”,

Rediker recounts the torturous details of a flogging of a crew member for some minor infraction or the Captain's orders for the maintenance of order among the enslaved.

Rediker traces the history of the African slave trade from the earliest years and the developments made to make it a more profitable pursuit. The slave ship went through many metamorphosis to make it both a "factory and a prison, and in this combination lay its genius and its horror." (Rediker, 44) A factory was originally a word meaning a merchant and, according to Rediker was an establishment for traders carrying on business in foreign countries. It was a merchant's trading station. (Rediker, 44). The slave ship, he continues, was also a mobile, seagoing prison at a time when the modern prison had not yet been established on land.

There were enormous risks for all of the merchants involved in the Slave trade. There was the problem of shipwrecks, piracy, insurrection and disease. Rediker recounts the problems of the crews on the slave ships. The most obvious problem was disease. Even the well-traveled of the sailors ran the risk of illness when they went onto the African continent. These men had no antibodies to fight the disease of the jungles and the insects of the Dark Continent. Many died before even beginning the return journey. A typical ship crew included "a captain, a first and second mate, a doctor, a carpenter, a boatswain, a gunner (or armorer), often a cooper (barrel maker), a cook, ten to twelve seamen, a handful of landmen, and one or two ship's boys." (57) Rediker explains that the manning of these ships included more men than a regular merchant ship would require because of the dangers of the slave trade. More men are required to guard the captives and the doctor is needed to make sure the cargo lands in the America's as healthy as is possible. Additionally the doctor is needed to tend to the needs of the crew, weakened by poor conditions, lack of proper nutrition and the brutality of ship living conditions.

The Captain of each vessel had control over life and death of both the enslaved but also the

crew. In scholarly accounts Rediker tells of the beatings, whippings, and outright murders of crew members who did not follow his rules to the letter of the law. Once the enslaved come on board, the cruelty is transferred to them. In one instance Rediker recounts the dismembering, piece by piece of a black slave in full view of the other captives. This is done in order to put fear into the other cargo. Death on the Slave Ships is so common that sharks follow the ships across the ocean. Viewing the sharks (and feeding the dead to the sharks) is also done in order to keep the captives in line.

The captives, strangers on their own continent become entwined in their destiny. Although warriors from rival tribes, once they survive a death march begin to see their chances of escape diminished. On board the slave ship they begin to develop a common language, along with a common goal. The Captain and the crew are able to determine, based on the amount of time at sea when the captives will try to defeat the crew. At this time they are kept below deck and tortured until they are undermined and morally defeated. As much as the captives try to unite, the crew seems always one step ahead of them.

The author gives great detail and instances of the torture dished out to the enslaved. If a captive decides to stop eating they can be whipped until they change their plan. If the whipping doesn't work, a speculum oris is instituted which is forced into the mouth and opens the throat then gruel is forced down the throat of the captive. This process is horrendously painful, both to experience and to read. Thumb screws were used to subdue rebelling women, manacles for wrists and shackles for ankles were ever present and the damage they did to both the body and the spirit of the enslaved is described and relived several times during the text.

Aboard the slave ship the horror is not exclusive to the cargo. The tales of abuse for the crew abound. By the end of the slave trade many times crew members have to be kidnapped off the streets of Liverpool [or other port cities]. Many times a poor soul, drunken at a pub wakes up to find himself

impressed into the service of a slaver. The life expectancy aboard a slaver is short. Surviving disease, hunger, abuse and punishments is a pyrrhic victory for the crew but, if a large enough cargo reaches the Caribbean in moderately good health, the money they earn sometimes makes it worth their while. More often than not, this is not the case. Towards the end of the book there are stories of blacks who give food, medicine and care to indigent seamen. The irony of this humanity gives pause to the compassion of the human spirit.

Rediker also details the accounts of many individuals, once active in the slave trade who become staunch abolitionists. Poems, essays, treatises against slavery are recorded in this book. Rediker leaves little unrecorded in this book. He takes great pains to tell of the growth of the abolitionist movement, all the while paralleling the growth of the trade. He recounts the spread of the movement with the improvements in the slave industry. He tells of the transformation of slave ship captains, and backers who change their beliefs when they actually view the horrors that this human cargo endures. He even addresses the concerns of those who believe that slavery is wrong, but have so much invested in the industry that they have no way out.

Rediker writes more than 350 pages about the horrors of slavery. The gruesome descriptions of devious punishments, the disregard for the humanity that it is forced upon, the tearing apart of families, villages, nations and the extinction of languages, religions, and culture is dispersed throughout the entire book. The work is scholarly but it is also amazingly graphic. Only the most stout-hearted reader should attempt this read. Unfortunately the last paragraph of the book negates, to this reader, the rest of the work. In the closing words the author throws in his political statement about paying retribution to the descendents of individuals who endured this horror. "Reparations are, in my view, in order, but justice cannot be reduced to a calculus of money..."(355) Before this closing I would have

recommended this book to anyone interested enough to read such an in depth study about the Slave trade, told from the stage of the Slave Ship.

I had intended to use many passages from this text for my American History class. The more I read, the more I realized that this book would be better in the hands of both an experienced reader and an individual very well versed in this epoch of history. I actually stopped on several occasions during this read to reflect on the movie "ROOTS". The film actually handles the horror of the Middle Passage with much of the detail used in this book. From the birth to the capture of Kunta Kinte, through a death march, onboard the Lord Ligonier, being danced, a slave revolt, the punishments, tools of torture and the ordeal of the Middle Passage are brilliantly portrayed. The Slave sale and the indoctrination onto the plantation are depicted with equal care for detail. I will continue to watch "ROOTS" to illustrate to my 8th grade students about this "magnificent drama" in human history.